Vincent Chen

Greening the Concrete Jungle: Impact of Public and Private Contributions on Parks in Late 20th-Century New York City

The rise of the 1970s fiscal crisis in New York City, triggered by years of municipal overspending and an inability to address the growing instability and investor skepticism in New York's bond market, forced the city government to cut back on its budget as it racked up almost 10 billion dollars of debt. Due to New York City's heavy emphasis on public works, the lack of a sustainable budget in the 1970s meant welfare-related expenditures (which totalled to $3.5 billion) were largely reduced.[1] These cuts led to the decline of its public infrastructure, including its sanitation and education sectors, but especially within the city's public parks. As landmark parks of the city such as Central Park and Prospect Park fell into disrepair, public works initiatives and private contributors acted to restore the city's many failing green spaces: over time, new private organizations (such as the Central Park Conservancy) further created a shift from governmental management in New York City public goods to public-private partnerships. With these changes, new managerial strategies emerged that drew from private, corporate frameworks alongside a more engaged attitude toward the degradation of ecological areas. Overall, public works projects and private contributions within New York City's parks helped shape the rising urban environmentalism movement through the late 20th century by promoting greater civic engagement and ultimately defined a rising sense of ecological responsibility. These projects additionally influenced broader urban planning paradigms through the integration of decentralized management, adaptive reuse, and long-term sustainability planning.

Urban planning in New York City's parks shifted to match private contributors' interests as they began to pitch in; this rise in privatization and public-private partnerships created the modern program-based model. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s following the fiscal crisis, city officials increasingly turned to private donors and nonprofits to revitalize the various parks

[1] Congressional Budget Office, "The Causes of New York City's Fiscal Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (1975): 670, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2148749.

within the city due to lack of adequate funding. In large, iconic parks, such as Central and Prospect Park, the city's reliance on private partnerships saw a shift of public goods management to strategic funding and planning operated through conservancy-led stewardship. This program-based model quickly extended beyond flagship venues, as smaller parks and playgrounds adopted similar conservancy frameworks, spawning neighborhood "friends of" groups that mirrored the Central Park Conservancy's fundraising and maintenance strategies.[2] By embedding private-sector efficiency and donor-driven vision into public park governance, these partnerships not only reversed decades of decline but also institutionalized a performance-based ethos – one that prioritized measurable restoration milestones, volunteer engagement metrics, and long-term endowment growth as benchmarks of success.

Using Central Park, the city's landmark green space, as a case study, the evolution of urban planning became evident as civic responsibility and managerial control became commonplace policies of park programs and privatization. With the rise of a top-down managerial system, private conservancies and organizations created a new conceptualization of public goods that bundled parks with aesthetic and environmental value, as well as elite donor preferences and control. Namely, by reframing the public park's function to emphasize elite-driven restoration, increased management and professionalization of park care occurred alongside the alignment of planning goals with private visions to better cater to conservancy demands; moreover, the use of a class-based approach within Central Park's privatization meant that decision-making authority and programmatic focus increasingly reflected the priorities of wealthy donors, with the Central Park Conservancy's portfolio becoming a capitalist commodity.

---

[2] John Krinsky and Maud Simonet, "Safeguarding Private Value in Public Spaces: The Neoliberalization of Public Service Work in New York City's Parks," *Social Justice* 38, no. 1/2 (2011): 33–34, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23345523. Interestingly, many of these groups did not take the form of conservancies or have management contracts, however many did enact similar project-based management and fundraising techniques.

At the same time, this privatization allowed for the reintroduction of groundskeeping forces starting from the 1980s to direct greater attention to neglected ecological areas within the park. This mainly culminated in the rise of horticulture programs – which were previously neglected under the municipal government – with expansion into fields such as arboriculture or soil management, amongst others. Private management by the Central Park Conservancy influenced planning models by incorporation of new design philosophies centered around restoration and sustainability – while ultimately centered around public benefit, many of these efforts reflected the class-based model where new programs were approved based on the regulations of private individuals and the Conservancy. Many of these practices would later serve as guidelines for future conservancy-led initiatives and urban park revitalization efforts across New York City and other major metropolitan areas, through civic engagement via volunteerism and public programming through the gradual normalization of nonprofit-led planning models.[3] [4]

However, changes in urban planning paradigms that resulted were met with criticism. Mainly, the growth of power of these organizations led to fears from various citizens regarding the responsibility of private actors to maintain public spaces and the interests of privatization. Disputes over modern park planning, such as the expansion of conservancy control over additional parks without clear oversight, emerged at this time as a response to democratic governance. With the rise of private interests in public parks, a growing sense of responsibility emerged amongst private conservancies that saw themselves as the main operators of public parks, and in some cases sought to expand their management to all of Manhattan.[5] For Central Park, concerns over privatization and the potential commercialization of public goods (e.g.

[3] Oliver Cooke, "A Class Approach to Municipal Privatization: The Privatization of New York City's Central Park," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 71 (2007), 116–18, 126, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27673073.
[4] Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, *Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 82, 79.
[5] Douglas Martin, "Benefactor Wants Private Group to Manage Central Park," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1997, 35, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1997/01/17/208639.html.

charging admission for entry) led many city officials and parks advocates to call for strict public regulation.[6] Here, while privatization did address visible decline and enabled high-quality restoration, it also raised concerns over the erosion of public oversight and equity in park access.

Meanwhile, others cited the privatization of Central Park as a revival of one of America's greatest artistic achievements – amid an ongoing lack of public funding, the park's privatization was perceived as a way to preserve the artistic and cultural value of Central Park while shielding its survival from future political or fiscal turmoil. Degradation within recreation centers in late 20th-century New York City reached critical levels, as half of which were built prior to 1950.[7] As Central Park sat as the city's forefront public space, numerous projects were outlined totalling to $7 million that sought to restore the flagship park's condition through public funds and philanthropic contributions. Despite fears of an elitist influence on the public space, park privatization succeeded in large part due to the retained public ownership model, which confined private influences to philanthropic purposes and, according to proponents of privatization, still kept final decision-making authority with the city.[8]

As a counterbalance to private interests, public works projects and community activism within late 20th century parks and green spaces led to a rise in grassroots urban environmentalism as public actors revitalized New York City's natural areas; urban environmentalism thus grew as the revival of the city's public parks led citizens to take charge of public spaces through rising ecological awareness. Communities, including local neighborhood groups, environmental activists, etc. began organizing park cleanup efforts, restoration of vacant lots as well as greater advocacy for park equity, especially in historically underserved

---

[6] Martin, "Benefactor Wants," 35.
[7] John Surico, *A New Leaf: Revitalizing New York City's Aging Parks Infrastructure* (New York: Center for an Urban Future, 2018), 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21706.
[8] Grace Glueck, "A Conservancy Will Seek Private Central Park Aid," *The New York Times*, August 16, 1980, 23–24, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1980/08/16/111275443.html.

communities. One area of particular interest to both urban officials and the city's citizens were community gardens, specifically the land that was occupied by these gardens. In Loisaida (also commonly known as Alphabet City), an impoverished pocket of Manhattan's East Village community, gardener residents sought to create community gardens that acted as areas of food production as well as empowerment of a wide ethnic background of lower-class residents. These efforts eventually led to conflict, however, as gardening organizations such as Operation Green Thumb (OGT) and the Green Guerillas saw 90% of gardeners being white, which often led to the rise of "garden politics" in these workplaces; additionally, reluctance by city officials to fund community gardens further fueled issues of gentrification and disenfranchisement as communal needs such as green spaces were neglected. In fact, the first Earth Day demonstrations, which had taken place in New York City and sought to address the dangers of environmental neglect, later shaped a citizen-driven push to reclaim urban green space – namely, with the shift from the recreation facility to the open-space system in the 1960s and 70s, these new models standardized designs aimed at broader accessibility and environmental consciousness emerged that followed from shifting demographics in urban centers.[9] This need for community activism ultimately served as the catalyst for the rise of environmentalism, with grassroots movements in particular framing access to green space as a matter of justice and local autonomy.[10]

Additionally, with the deindustrialization of New York and disinvestment in urban infrastructure, many neighborhoods (particularly in the Bronx and Brooklyn) faced greater vacancy and neglect, which motivated new public works projects to restore these spaces. However, the large numbers of vacant lots caused by migration from the inner city earlier in the

[9] Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 205, https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5052/The-Politics-of-Park-DesignA-History-of-Urban.
[10] Karen Schmelzkopf, "Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space," *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (1995): 364-66, 376–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/215279.

century had led to widespread deterioration of community landscapes and a lack of access to green space and protests. City officials attempted to maintain centralized control over these empty areas to consolidate park management and limit the influence of grassroots groups; however, these efforts frequently resulted in contested land-use battles and protests. In 1984, land plots that were previously slated to become urban community gardens were placed under a moratorium, and this limitation coupled with the growing need for low-income housing often conflicted with the existing and soon-to-be installed gardens.[11] As a result, hundreds of community gardeners – joined by advocates as far as Boston, Madison, or Atlanta – protested the sale of these lots, as demands for legislation to preserve urban green spaces (including the over 700 community gardens at risk) were made.[12] During this time period, the founding of OGT, which continues to serve as the nation's largest urban gardening program, helped to institutionalize community gardening within city policy. Alongside other grassroots movements, these efforts led to widespread civic involvement in public areas, including harvest fairs, public art installments, and neighborhood beautification projects.[13] The rise of these movements promoted public works projects that not only enhanced the city's green infrastructure but also redefined parks and gardens as tools to enhance social equity.

With regards to environmentalism, this meant many urban residents embraced ecological stewardship as a form of community empowerment. Educational reforms (including those proposed by the Council on the Environment of New York City), sought to utilize rising

---

[11] Schmelzkopf, "Urban Community Gardens," 376–78.
[12] Jennifer Steinhauer, "Hundreds Gather to Protest City's Auction of Garden Lots," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1999, 33, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1999/04/11/171689.html.
[13] William McKibben, "Vacant Lot" *The New Yorker*, September 22, 1986, 31–32, https://archives-newyorker-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/newyorker/1986-09-22/flipbook/031/. In particular, organizations such as Operation Green Thumb contributed to a larger Community Garden Movement, which today oversees over 550 gardens and 20,000 garden members.

ecological awareness to create changes to overall beautification within urban areas.[14] These reforms largely tried to leverage school-based curricula and community workshops to shift public perception of ecological reforms from liabilities to assets through the greater Earth Day Movement, which encouraged citizens to view their neighborhoods as integral parts of a broader urban ecosystem and take greater responsibility for air, water, and waste removal within the city.[15] These initiatives not only enhanced environmental quality but also acted as social hubs to attract urban environmentalists, which would continue to strengthen neighborhood networks and create a template for future urban green movements.

Finally, broader urban planning paradigms were reshaped as a greater focus was placed on urban zoning policy – this included greenway development, district reapportionment, and other novel sustainability and adaptive reuse initiatives that lasted into the modern day. The creation of new development plans within the city sought to create a balance between urban growth and environmental preservation along the city's waterfronts and greenways; on the city's waterfront, for instance, the usage of a Waterfront Revitalization program created policies that protected local ecological services in accordance with the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) of 1972. In particular, with greater focus on sustainability due to events such as Earth Day, the protection of designated habitats (e.g. wetlands) through the use of indigenous plants, as well as commitment to public access through infrastructure maintenance became central tenets of future ecological reform. As a result, environmental stewardship was both institutionalized into

---

[14] Bernard Gotfryd, *Earth Day, NYC*, photograph, Library of Congress, 1980, https://www.loc.gov/item/2020736387/. Upon further investigation, this program was created by the Environmental Action Coalition (EAC), which was established as the NY Committee for Earth Day. From the NYS DEC, this program developed environmental curricula for schools, organized community projects, and produced educational materials, suggesting a growing attention to environmental stewardship, especially in urban environments.

[15] The Village Voice, "Issue of April 16, 1970," 21, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=KEtq3P1Vf8oC&dat=19700416&printsec=frontpage&hl=en.

municipal land use policy and also reframed as a civic right, giving ecological concerns greater standing in the city's long-term development trajectory.[16]

Similar projects throughout the city (e.g. the Greenway Plan, High Line, Gateway National Recreation Area, etc.) also promoted the incorporation of green spaces into various manmade and natural linear spaces within the city, in an effort to provide various health, recreational, and transportational benefits.[17] In accordance with existing and proposed legislation such as the WRP and CZMA, the Greenway Plan for NYC emphasized the adaptive reuse of underutilized waterfronts and infrastructure, in particular toward degraded areas of the city. In fact, this pointed at the wider phenomena of the City Beautiful Movement (a philosophy that redefined public design in terms of beautification and civil/moral uplift) – though it had begun in the early 20th-century planning, many of its concepts resonated in New York as planners pursued orderly green systems that inspired similar moral elevation.[18] In New York City, City Beautiful culminated in the creation of the High Line, which repurposed an abandoned freight rail line along western Manhattan into a now-celebrated urban park; the disused industrial site was used as a recreational area and displayed a greater understanding of ecological impact in park design and adaptive reuse at this time.[19] This was created thanks to the rise of the conservancy park, popularized in areas such as Central Park, which allowed urban planning to redirect resources to private/citizen groups to develop and maintain innovative public spaces outside traditional

---

[16] New York City Department of City Planning, *The New Waterfront Revitalization Program* (New York: New York City Department of City Planning, September 2002), 3–6, 17–19, 24–26, https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/applicants/wrp/wrp_full.pdf

[17] New York City Department of City Planning, *A Greenway Plan for New York City* (New York: New York City Department of City Planning, Fall 1993), 3–4, https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15708.

[18] James B. LaGrand, "Understanding Urban Progressivism and the City Beautiful Movement," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 1 (2020): 11–21, https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.1.0011.

[19] Alan Tate, "Urban Parks in the Twentieth Century," *Environment and History* 24, no. 1 (2018): 83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26529577.

municipal control, leveraging both local advocacy and philanthropy.[20] The creation of the Gateway National Recreation Area – the National Park Service's inaugural urban "gateway" project – also mirrored the growing shift toward multi-party park governance, with national resources (rather than municipal resources) redirected to create the city's landmark national park. During the 1970s, this culminated in the allotment of 26,000+ acres of land to be used for beaches, marshes, wildlife habitat, etc. for public use; it, alongside Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco, encouraged similar changes to urban planning policy in other US cities, particularly to their park revitalization efforts.[21] These actions led to nationwide reevaluation of how urban green space could be funded, managed, and integrated into the fabric of cities, which brought support to New York City's hybrid park management model.

Lastly, the creation of special districts within New York City highlights the usage of district reapportionment in the city, which served to create urban zoning that provided greater access for public goods. Due to the large growth of its public spaces, as well as the large population of the city, New York City's zoning has evolved through the 19th and 20th centuries to meet the needs of its citizens. In the context of its parks, this meant that the establishment of Special National Waterfront Areas could properly preserve natural areas, which under previous jurisdiction was subject to a less stringent balance of public scenic areas, which were mandated under new zoning regulations.[22] This evolution in zoning effectively incorporated City Beautiful and social reform with economic demands through an institutional lens, as changes in city design and development prompted the rise of an overall-districting model.[23] This is vital as previous

---

[20] Christoph Lindner, *Deconstructing the High Line: Postindustrial Urbanism and the Rise of the Elevated Park* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 125–29, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/51908.
[21] Sarah J. Morath, "A Park for Everyone: The National Park Service in Urban America." *Natural Resources Journal* 56, no. 1 (2016): 7–8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24889108.
[22] Christopher Rizzo, "Protecting the Environment at the Local Level: New York City's Special District Approach." *Fordham Environmental Law Journal* 13, no. 2 (2002): 246–47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44174389.
[23] Norman Williams, "The Evolution of Zoning," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 15, no. 3 (1956): 253, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3484846.

models of zoning were often rigid or exclusionary – the usage of racial zoning ordinances, for instance, not only barred black and other disenfranchised citizens from living in certain neighborhoods, but also restricted their access to public goods, which further entrenched both environmental and social injustice.[24] Thus, the remodelling of urban districts not only allowed for greater incorporation of green spaces in each planning district but also responded to shifting political and demographic pressures in the late 20th-century.

Within post-fiscal crisis New York City, the questions of equity and sustainability became entwined as the city sought to navigate its role as America's model of urban green space management. During this time, elite-driven privatization as well as public neighborhood-based environmentalism and works projects served to safeguard against the degradation and reshape the maintenance of New York City's parks and public spaces. While resistance to both privatization and the municipal government occurred during this era (driven by fears of private economic gain and/or systemic exclusion and discrimination), new forms of civic engagement also arose as a product of these tensions which allowed for policy changes and innovation during the late-20th century. The institutions of post-fiscal crisis New York City thus laid the groundwork for today's hybrid models of urban green space management, where questions of equity, access, and sustainability remain central and guide planning decisions, public-private partnerships, and grassroots environmental activism within the City of New York.

---

[24] Norman Williams, "The Evolution of Zoning," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 15, no. 3 (1956): 253, 255–56 http://www.jstor.org/stable/3484846. For more information on zoning, within Washington DC similar divisions were made as early as the 18th century for landscaped as well as residential/commercial areas: Historic American Buildings Survey, *L'Enfant-McMillan Plan of Washington, DC, Washington, District of Columbia, DC*, photograph, Library of Congress, 1993, https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.dc0776.photos?st=gallery&c=160.

Addendum

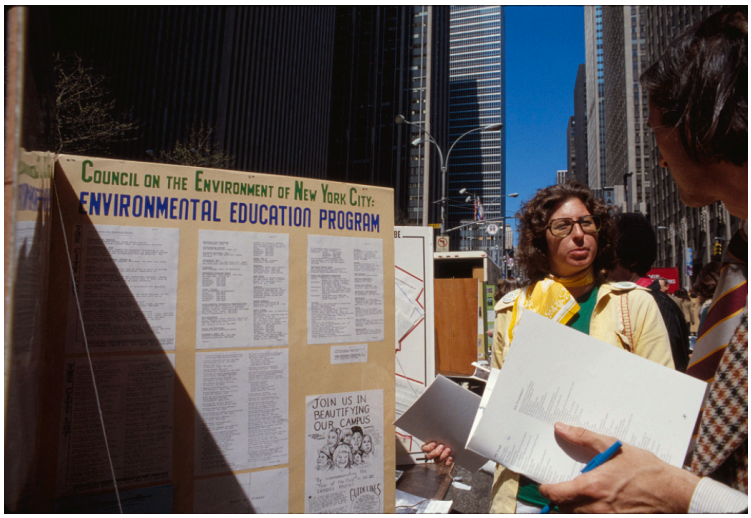

Illustration 1. Earth Day poster on the Environmental Education Program, which sought to attract greater attention to environmental education in the US. Source: *Earth Day, NYC*, photograph, Library of Congress, 1980.

Illustration 2. Aerial view looking southeast down the Mount Pleasant and 17th Street corridors. This system of urban planning (created by Pierre Charles L'Enfant) had conceptualized urban parks fit specifically within an organized city grid as early as the 18th century (e.g. the central triangular green space, many of which exist in NYC today). Source: *L'Enfant-McMillan Plan of Washington, DC,* Washington, District of Columbia, DC, 1993, photograph, Library of Congress.

Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Cooke, Oliver. "A Class Approach to Municipal Privatization: The Privatization of New York City's Central Park." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 71 (2007): 112–32. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27673073.

Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5469.001.0001.

Harnik, Peter. *From Rails to Trails: The Making of America's Active Transportation Network*. University of Nebraska Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j13z9k.

Krinsky, John, and Maud Simonet. "Safeguarding Private Value in Public Spaces: The Neoliberalization of Public Service Work in New York City's Parks." *Social Justice* 38, no. 1/2 (123-124) (2011): 28–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23345523.

LaGrand, James B. "Understanding Urban Progressivism and the City Beautiful Movement." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 1 (2020): 11–21. https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.1.0011.

Lindner, Christoph. *Deconstructing the High Line: Postindustrial Urbanism and the Rise of the Elevated Park*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/51908.

Morath, Sarah J. "A Park for Everyone: The National Park Service in Urban America." *Natural Resources Journal* 56, no. 1 (2016): 1–21. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24889108.

Rizzo, Christopher. "Protecting the Environment at the Local Level: New York City's Special District Approach." *Fordham Environmental Law Journal* 13, no. 2 (2002): 225–58. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44174389.

Rogers, Elizabeth Barlow. *Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5808.001.0001.

Schmelzkopf, Karen. "Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space." *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (1995): 364–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/215279.

Surico, John. *A New Leaf: Revitalizing New York City's Aging Parks Infrastructure* (New York: Center for an Urban Future, 2018). https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21706.

Tate, Alan. "Urban Parks in the Twentieth Century." *Environment and History* 24, no. 1 (2018): 81–102. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26529577.

Williams, Norman. “The Evolution of Zoning.” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 15, no. 3 (1956): 253–64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3484846.

Wilson, William H. *Planning and Urban Form in the Twentieth-Century United States: A Review Article*. *The Town Planning Review* 65, no. 3 (1994): 305–11. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40113648.

Primary Sources

Congressional Budget Office. “The Causes of New York City’s Fiscal Crisis.” *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (1975): 659–74. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2148749.

Glueck, Grace. “A Conservancy Will Seek Private Central Park Aid.” *The New York Times*, August 16, 1980. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1980/08/16/111275443.html.

Gotfryd, Bernard. *Earth Day, NYC*. 1980. Photograph. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2020736387/.

Historic American Buildings Survey. *L'Enfant-McMillan Plan of Washington, DC, Washington, District of Columbia, DC*. Washington D.C., 1993. Photograph. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.dc0776.photos?st=gallery&c=160.

Martin, Douglas. “Benefactor Wants Private Group to Manage Central Park.” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1997. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1997/01/17/208639.html

McKibben, William. “Vacant Lot.” *The New Yorker*, September 22, 1986. https://archives-newyorker-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/newyorker/1986-09-22/flipbook/031/.

New York City Department of City Planning. *A Greenway Plan for New York City.* New York: New York City Department of City Planning, Fall 1993. https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15708.

New York City Department of City Planning. *The New Waterfront Revitalization Program.* New York: New York City Department of City Planning, September 2002. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/applicants/wrp/wrp_full.pdf.

Safdie, Moshe. *Beyond Habitat*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970. https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5095/Beyond-Habitat.

Steinhauer, Jennifer. “Hundreds Gather to Protest City's Auction of Garden Lots.” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1999. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1999/04/11/171689.html.

The Village Voice. “Issue of April 16, 1970.” Accessed March 3, 2025. https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=KEtq3P1Vf8oC&dat=19700416&printsec=frontpage&hl=en.